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CHAPTER 6

The Reluctant Luo

I

THE Luo are the second largest tribe in Kenya, coming next to the Kikuyu, and at the moment the most influential politically. This is because most Kikuyu politicians went into detention camps at the time of Mau Mau. While Kikuyu cats were away, Luo mice played vigorously, and grabbed the best political cheese. Speaking generally, the Luo are hefty, black-skinned, somewhat ox-like people with prominent teeth, a reputation for making good labourers and a rather slow-witted approach to life.

Needless to say, there are plenty of exceptions. Mr. Tom Mboya is a Luo and, while he has been called many things, 'slow-witted' has never been among them. Their natural food is fish and they are not by nature a cattle people. Their sturdy women smoke pipes with long clay stems. The Luo are not Bantu but Nilotic and their affinities, lingual and tribal, lie more with people in Uganda, such as the Acholi, than with any other Kenya tribes. They are surrounded, however, by Bantu peoples, with whom they share the wide, fertile, steamy and mainly flat basin that surrounds Lake Victoria. Around this basin lie hills from which warrior tribes look down on them, formerly as an eagle looked upon its prey. Far to the south lie the plains of Masai.

People who have dealt with other tribes find the Luo difficult. Their obstinacy is legendary, they are inclined to be sullen and suspicious. The Kikuyu can be all these things, but they are nimble-minded, subtle and, for those they like, have charm. Luo people can be brave and loyal but charm is rarely among their attributes. They are faintly Teutonic, in an African fashion.

So it is not surprising that of all the major Kenya peoples, leaving aside the Masai, the Luo have put up the stiffest

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resistance to the forward march of Progress in the agricultural field. No spontaneous wish for any branch of Progress except the political seems to have gripped the collective Luo mind. Here, on these hot and apathetic lakeland flats, all the impetus has come from Europeans.

It might be argued that the Government has no call to make people change their ways against their will. This indeed is an argument much used by Luo politicians. It is an old story: should nanny sit by and watch Master Robert break up his toys—in this case, ruin the soil, create acute erosion, turn the whole of Nyanza province, which contains one-third of Kenya's population, into a great rural slum?

Beyond question, that was going on. In Nyanza province there are over two million cattle, about one to every two acres. It would be a job to support this rate of stocking on the finest pastures under skilled management; here it is utterly impossible. The cattle have become so small and shrivelled that they are really not much larger than Great Danes, but their sharp hoofs can still make and deepen gullies as they track a way to springs. During the last three years, the output of crops in the province has halved, because yields have dropped so sharply. Yet there are more and more mouths to feed.

All the evils of land abuse were here displayed in concentrated form. No manure, no rotations, no resting land under grass; maize or cotton again and again, planted too late and in the wrong manner; no trees, communal grazing destroyed by useless skinny little beasts. It was not for want of trying by the technical staff. For years they had been urging, persuading, bullying, demonstrating, and they had scarcely dented Luo indifference and complacency. Famine was beginning to threaten these overcrowded areas—for the one thing the people continued to produce more and more of was their own kind.

II

And so the Government decided that the only salvation for the Luo lay in dividing their communally owned land into individual holdings. Land consolidation—the first stage

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towards enclosure—was proclaimed as the official policy and, in 1958, an area called Nyabondo picked out for an experiment. The edict went forth that everyone must define his holdings, mark them out and do, in fact, as the Kikuyu were doing with such success, not to mention the Nandi and Kipsigis and many others.

On the heels of the agricolas with propaganda, local politicians moved in to tell the people it was all a trick to steal their land. Whether or no everyone believed this, no one dared to quarrel openly with the politicians, and not a single land-holder obeyed the Government.

'On 30th December, I called a meeting and closed the whole thing down,' Mr. Peter MacEntee, the D.C., told me. 'All right, I said, if you don't like it you needn't have it; ruin your land if you want to, as much as you like; what do we care? It's your funeral. Go ahead, and good luck to you. The agricolas will leave you alone from now on, the instructors are pulling out to places where people want them; we understand now that this sort of thing is *far* too advanced for you. Keep up the bad work, and good-bye.'

Mr. MacEntee had evidently enjoyed this. In time the Luo, when in their mule-like frame of mind, subdue the greatest enthusiasts. But there was a sequel.

'Three weeks later, half a dozen men from Nyabondo turned up in my office. They had a little plan, with some *shamba* boundaries marked on it. "We have decided to consolidate," they said. "Here are the boundaries of the first *shambas* we've completed. We've marked out each man's fragments and exchanged them as you said. Now we want to lay them out on proper lines. Please send us an instructor and a European."

'This was the first deputation. Others followed. Now the whole of Nyabondo is completed—the first in central Nyanza. We know what to do now. Use the couldn't-care-less technique.'

Another example: on the Kano plains, where rice grows under irrigation, until this year the agricultural department has looked after the bunds. They had endless trouble—arguments, sullen silences, even sabotage. They got the output up to 30,000 bags and there it stuck. Then they withdrew,

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telling the rice-growers they must make and maintain their own bunds. Last season the output jumped to 50,000 bags.

III

We drove to Nyabondo across the Kano plains. No one loves these plains. They are not only flat, they are absolutely treeless, dry, cracked, windswept, overcrowded, dusty and mean. The soil is 'black cotton', an especially viscous clay in which any vehicle bogs down irrevocably in wet weather—very fertile potentially, but soul-destroying to work. 'The people are like their soil,' I was told. 'They break your heart and yet you go on trying, something's there.'

Everywhere are circles of a particular euphorbia, a dark-green, harsh, ugly plant that grows about eight feet tall and surrounds every group of huts. When a family head dies, his homestead is evacuated, his huts are left to rot away and only the euphorbia hedge remains, so the plains are covered with old circles as well as those in use. People have tried planting eucalyptus trees, but white ants eat them before they are man-high.

No individual cultivates his land in one piece. He digs or ploughs a patch here, a patch there, another bit over there, two more bits down the hill and a piece two miles off across the valley that belonged to his mother's uncle. This is known as fragmentation; it is almost universal among Bantu people, exists also among others such as the Luo, and is like a net spread for the feet of Progress in which he becomes enmeshed and stultified.

The first stage of land enclosure must be for every cultivator to exchange fragments with his neighbours, so that all his land is gathered together in one piece. It is the first stage and also the hardest; land is life's blood to the people; it is like exhorting men to exchange their blood, or their children. Suspicions dart out of their holes like bee-eaters. Won't so-and-so, my neighbour, get an unfair share? The bit he wants to swap for my piece is smaller. Give up my fertile patch by the river where bananas flourish for that barren stretch of hillside? Never! Somewhere there is a trick in all this. . . .

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question of bribery and corruption crops up everywhere and all concerned on the official side recognize it as their deepest enemy. But when I put Mr. Ayan's points to them they were a little sceptical. 'Of course there is bribery,' they said, 'but it is not as bad as that. And it is not the people who oppose land reforms, it is the politicians.' Mr. Ayan had just sent a telegram to the Governor asking for the removal of the 'reactionary D.C.' in Kisumu, so relations were naturally a bit strained.

VI

On the way to Maseno we had passed the ostensible *casus belli* between District Council and Government: the Kisiani hills, a barren, rocky bluff entirely denuded of vegetation and a scene of the most gruesome erosion, given over to goats browsing on boulders and any indomitable weed that had managed to germinate. This place had been leased by the District Council to the Government for the purpose of afforestation and about 800 acres of trees had been planted at a cost of £13,000.

Afforestation is unpopular. Goats were allowed to destroy the Kisiani seedlings and, when the forest department put up fences, people came and tore them down in the night. Others started to cultivate in defiance not only of the terms of the lease, but of regulations which forbid cultivation on steep hillsides. All this, in the official view, was part of a deliberate political campaign to stir up anti-Government feeling.

The Kisiani quarrel brought to a head bad feeling between the Central Nyanza District Council and the Government. All the Councillors are African save for the chairman, who is the D.C. Most of its senior technical staff are European and, in particular, it employs (as do all District Councils with large revenues) a fully qualified accountant to manage its finances.

Those elected Councillors most anxious for unrestricted freedom objected strongly to this accountant. Africans, they said, should have the spending of African money without European interference. Officials retorted that in proper,

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honest accounting lies the only defence against wholesale bribery and corruption—against the sort of thing Mr. Ayan had complained about so powerfully. 311 648 668

In the midst of this controversy the Council, with its elected majority, repudiated the lease of the Kisiani afforestation area and refused to take steps to stop sabotage of the plantations. The Government retorted by demanding repayment of the £13,000 spent upon them. This would have meant raising the Council's annual rate from eighteen to twenty-one shillings on each adult male. 177

This demand to increase the rate was, of course, turned down flat by the elected Councillors, who in their anger sacked the accountant, appointed a totally unqualified African at £1,000 a year to succeed him, and threatened to dismiss other European staff on grounds of race. They also voted large increases in their own salaries and allowances. [186]

Naturally I asked Mr. Ayan's views. The Kisiani trouble, in his account, boiled down to a number of misunderstandings. The individuals who owned cultivation rights in the hills had not, he said, ever fully understood the matter, it had not been properly explained. They thought the trees would be theirs, not common property. They had never given their permission on paper, with marks or signatures. The matter was explained to them by an unpopular chief who did not wait to hear all their objections. When they grazed their goats in the plantations they thought they were on their own property and were much aggrieved when they were fined. They had no land elsewhere. Land hunger was so acute as to be a more important matter even than marriage. 'If a man should lose his wife he can buy another; but once the land is gone you cannot buy any more.' 311 177 648

It looked like one more failure in public relations. But the officials denied this. 'We explained over and over again,' they said. '*Barazas*, news-sheets, radio . . . Everyone had a chance to put his case. No, behind it is the old story—politicians spreading rumours that it's all a trick to steal the land.' [668]

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